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THE

METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH,

CONSTITUTIONALLY AND DISCIPLINARILY

ALWAYS

ANTI-SLAVERY.

BY C. PRINDLE, D. D.

CLEVELAND, O.:
MOUNT & CO., PRINTERS AND STATIONERS.
145 Seneca Street.
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August 3, 1903

WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

Has the Methodist Episcopal Church ever been constitutionally or disciplinarily pro-slavery? And has she, at any time, needed to change any rule of her discipline to place her right before the world upon this great moral question? This is an important question, which has occupied the attention of many in and out of the M. E. Church, more especially since 1835, and different opinions have been entertained in relation to it.

For some time the opinion was timidly expressed that SLAVEHOLDING in this Church was, on the whole, in agreement with the Rules and Constitution of the Church. But in agreement with the principle, "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," this view became more and more avowed, until within the remembrance of large portions of those now living, slaveholding was not only maintained on the authority of the golden rule, but, to maintain that slaveholding was sinful under all circumstances, rendered a Methodist preacher liable to SUSPENSION, and even EXPULSION. And under these liabilities, all who held these views lived for a series of years. And not until a most wonderful change took place, which I need not now detail, were we allowed to make our exodus from this worse than Egyptian bondage.

Throughout the history of Methodism, there were more or less who never bowed their knees to this Baal. But they were so overborne by numbers and OUTWARD INFLUENCES, that this elect class, at one time, bore a relation to the masses, as Elijah did to Israel, when he was compelled to say, "The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away." And yet, if seven thousand had not bowed their knees to this Baal, they had not showed themselves the open, valiant heroes of truth. Such have been the facts, when in self abnegation, the martyr spirit repossessed a portion of the M. E. Church, who, becoming imbued with the spirit of the immortal Wesley, said: "ALL SLAVEHOLDERS,

of whatever rank or degree, were exactly on A LEVEL WITH MEN STEALERS."

From the time that the inherent and ineradicable sinfulness of SLAVEHOLDING began to be treated with Christian honesty and plainness, salvation began to dawn upon us. And, taking another step towards the point at which we are aiming, we remark, that if the M. E. Church has always been constitutionally and disciplinarily opposed to SLAVEHOLDING, we ought to welcome this truth as creditable alike to the denomination and the Christianity in which she has been educated.

We entertain no reasonable doubt, but as the facts have been recently developed, this has been in the PAST as it is NOW, the true position of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Thanks be to God, we have such proof of the correctness of this view, as now to settle this great question.

At different periods our General Conferences have censured and condemned abolitionism. But the only instances in which the TRUE MEANING of the General Rule has been examined and officially acted upon by that body, was in 1856 and 1860. On both of those occasions, and partially in 1844, this question was probed to the bottom, and large numbers of those who constituted those bodies maintained most conclusively that the General Rule—which forbids the buying and selling of men, women and children—was conclusive against HOLDING SLAVES. And the General Conference of 1860, by a vast majority, declared that this rule not only was a prohibition of slaveholding, but was mainly against this evil practice. This Conference adopted the masterly report prepared by the late Bishop Kingsley, in which this point was not only made fundamental, but by a vote so overwhelming that one hundred and fifty-five were given in its favor, and fifty-eight in the negative of this view, a majority abundantly sufficient to settle the meaning of any law question in Methodism not specified to be settled by specific majorities, as in the case of changing of restrictive rules.

It is readily granted that General Conferences, and other bodies in the M. E. Church, as well as numerous individuals, lent their opinions to the support of SLAVEHOLDING in the Church, and at the same time to the condemnation of anti-slavery, or abolitionism. But these views and sentiments, on mature and careful examination, have been shown to have been erroneous and contrary to the fundamental principles of Methodism, and consequently all admini-

strations founded upon these assumed but mistaken views, have been utterly null and void.

The ground we assume, as capable of the most satisfactory proof, is this: That the General Rule—which forbids the buying and selling of men, women and children, etc.—was from the BEGINNING, and has been ever since, a law against HOLDING slaves as conclusively, as it is, or has been, against BUYING or SELLING. And this we propose now to prove, not only by leading individuals in the M. E. Church, but by the official acts of the General Conference as the LEGISLATIVE and JUDICIAL authority of the M. E. Church.

This body is not only the concentration of authority to enact laws and rules for the regulation and government of the whole Church, but in this body is concentrated the supreme authority to settle and DECIDE the MEANING of all rules and laws that they themselves have passed and enacted. PLEASE MARK THIS POINT. The General Conference of the M. E. Church has no jurisprudential power that can be exercised over her, excepting in the six particulars including the restrictive rules. I regret that it is so, but I state an undeniable fact. I think there should be what might be termed a Supreme Court, having final appellate jurisdiction to which all appellants might take cases, especially such cases as are included in the rules of our discipline and in the acts of our General Conferences.

Now let us meet squarely the question we proposed at the commencement of this article, "What are the facts in relation to the toleration of slaveholding in the M. E. Church, and the true meaning of the general rule as it stood in the discipline before 1864, when the change in form or language was made.

We claim that the only periods in which the true meaning of this rule was ever carefully examined by our General Conferences, were in 1856, and 1860, when this question was fully settled. In these two periods able discussions were had in relation to the true meaning of this general rule, whether it really prohibited slaveholding as well as buying and selling, or whether it extended toleration to the holding of slaves, while it forbid only buying and selling. By many of the ablest members of both of these bodies, it was maintained that the rule as fully condemned SLAVEHOLDING as it did the BUYING and SELLING.

As specimens of the sentiments maintained on the floor of the Conference in 1856, take the following: Said H. Mattison, of the Black River Conference, "This is my position, that the General

Rule on slavery was designed to shut all slaveholding out of the Church, and that, consequently, the proposed new chapter is not in conflict with and does not go beyond the General Rule, but is in perfect harmony with it.

"That the paragraph relating to slavery in the General Rules, was put there to prohibit the admission of slaveholding into the Church, is evident from the circumstances of its introduction into the General Rules, and from the whole history of our Church so far as this slavery is concerned from first to last." He concludes his argument thus: "I conclude by re-affirming what I think I have proved, that the General Rules are both anti-slavery and prohibitory; that, therefore, all tampering with this chapter for the the last forty years, to lower its anti-slavery tone, has been in violation of the General Rules, and unconstitutional, while the section proposed in the report is in perfect harmony with the General Rule and perfectly constitutional. Let us adopt it then, as it is, and forever prohibit what is admitted on all hands to be sinful slaveholding from the Methodist Episcopal Church." At the same Conference Dr. Demster, the parent of theological institutions in the M. E. Church, in a masterly argument he made in favor of adopting the proposed change in the language in the General Rule, among other conclusive points, said: "Is not that in the proposed change, the prohibition of slaveholding in the Church; is not this slaveholding of the exact moral character of buying with an intention to enslave? Observe, sir, it is not BUYING or SELLING that the rule prohibits. What is it, then? The INTENTION TO ENSLAVE. Well, sir, I inherit a slave and hold him in slavery; have I, in this, an intention to enslave? Most certainly. Is not this, then, the identical thing which the rule forbids? Is not this all that the proposed chapter forbids? Can they be out of harmony? Is not the guilty element just the same in one who holds the inherited slave as property as in him who sells the victim as such? Such as doubt this must show the moral incongruity in the two things; that my holding property in a man is not like enabling another to do it; that holding him as a slave myself just as my neighbor would do it."

J. B. Finley, of Cincinnati Conference, opposed all new tests, because now, only those who forsook their sins, are eligible to membership in the Church; and slavery is a sin that must be forsaken. The Bible is against it. The whole discipline of the Church is

against it, and the only thing necessary to keep slavery out of the Church, was to administer faithfully under the one test of forsaking all sin, in order to admission therein.

Said C. Blakeslee, of the Oneida Conference: I do not believe that slavery has a constitutional existence and right in the Church. In opposition to this notion, I believe and maintain that it is in the Church, not by CONSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY AND POWER, but merely the force of circumstances—that it is in the Church by toleration and sufferance as an evil condemned and doomed to extirpation. Slavery has no place in our constitution; it is an incidental evil, an excresence that may be cast off at any time by General Conference enactment, without touching our constitution."

A most conclusive argument in support of the proposition that CONSTITUTIONALLY we have not been a slaveholding Church, that the General Rule did not authorize slaveholding, and that the General Conference was competent to pass a simple rule of discipline which would exclude all slaveholders, was prepared by Professor W. L. Harris, now Bishop Harris, which appeared in the periodical press first and afterward was published in book form. It was entitled "POWERS OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE." The editor of the Methodist Quarterly said, in reviewing it, "The large share of this argument by Dr. Harris, appeared originally in our Advocates, and its signal ability and apparent conclusiveness attracted general attention. In its present form it is one of the ablest constitutional documents that has ever appeared in our ecclesiastical history; reading much like one of John Marshall's decisions—leaving nothing further to be said on either side. We trust that every member of the next General Conference will give it a thorough consideration. In its present unanswered condition it is in great danger of settling the opinion of the Church on the topic it discusses."—Methodist Quarterly, April 1860.

Among leading men that concurred in this view at the Conferences of 1856 and 1860 were such as Bishops Thomson, Clark, Dr. Demster, Granville Moody, Floy, J. Porter, Raymond, Disbro, A. J. Phelps, etc., etc. At the Conference of 1856, the proposition was to change the General Rule so that it should read, "The BUYING OR SELLING, OR HOLDING A HUMAN BEING AS PROPERTY." And when the vote was taken 122 voted in favor, 96 against.

At the General Conference of 1860, the Committee on Slavery

proposed that the General Conference should so alter and change the Rule on this subject as to read, "The buying, selling or holding of men, women or children with an intention to enslave them." And in support of the report recommending this change, after an able discussion, there was given in favor of this change 138 yeas to 74 nays.

Now observe, that although the General Conference lacked a few votes of obtaining a two-thirds majority, so as to change the General Rule as proposed, yet the Conference declared that the rule as it then stood, forbid SLAVEHOLDING, so that from that time it was as prohibitory as it was after the language was changed in 1864. And as the true meaning of the rule was then settled, it was always the same. The only trouble had been a wrong meaning had been put upon the rule. Rightly interpreted it had always prohibited slaveholding, the same as buying and selling. We quote but a single paragraph from the able report of 1860, furnished by the late Bishop Kingsley and adopted by the General Conference, which will show the position assumed and maintained at that time, and which has never been controverted since. The report and Conference both said:

"What, then, is it, which in the rule gives criminality to the buying or selling? The only answer is, it is the intention to enslave them. That is, to continue their enslavement. This is what clothes the act of buying or selling with moral turpitude. It is the enslaving, therefore, by the continued holding and using as slaves, which gives criminality to the buying and selling. The holding and using are the only stimulus to the guilty traffic. We conclude, therefore, that as the holding and using are the only stimulating causes for the traffic, and as the INTENTION to continue their enslavement is the only sinful element, so far as the rule condemns it, the spirit of the rule must condemn the holding and using as well as the BUYING and SELLING. The intention which gives criminality to an act, and without which the act would not be criminal, must itself be criminal.

The report says again: "There is not in the judgment of the committee, one distinctive attribute of chattel slavery, which is not incompatible with the golden rule.

"From the foregoing, it appears to us that the General Rule should, in plain words, embody the honest doctrine of the Church, as well as the subject of SLAVEHOLDING, as on that of the slave trade."

And in agreement with the sentiment of this report, the next General Conference in 1864, the change in the General Rule was made in phraseology so as to read, "Slaveholding, buying or selling slaves," as it now stands in the discipline. But it was not claimed that this change in language made the slightest alteration in meaning.

Being the editor of the Wesleyan, the organ of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, and having published the proceedings of the General Conference, which had just closed its session in Buffalo, N.Y., I published the report of the committee on slavery, and made an elaborate argument in reviewing this report, which may be found in my paper of June 13, 1860. The point I made was this: That by the construction the committee gave to the General Rule, and the sanction the Conference gave to the report, that rule was declared law, and prohibited slaveholding as fully as it did buying and selling. And that altering the language of the rule gave to it no more legal force than it had without any such change.

The ground of my argument was founded upon the fact that the General Conference of the M. E. Church was not only a legislative body, but also a judicial; and that all ultimate decisions rested with this body, as to the meaning of any rule in the discipline. That a decision by the General Conference, determining the meaning of any rule, when its meaning was in question, was equal to a new wording of it. And as the rule on slavery had been in dispute, and the General Conference had determined what its meaning was, that settled the question.

We said that our argument was founded upon the prerogatives of the General Conference as a judicial body, and upon precedent. Allow us to cite that precedent.

During the prolonged controversy that finally resulted in the organization of the Methodist Protestant Church, the radicals, as they were called, claimed that the clause in the discipline prohibiting "inveighing against our doctrines and discipline," had been used arbitrarily to exclude persons from the Church, because they had expressed an honest difference of opinion in relation to the government of the Church. This was denied on the part of the defenders of the Church; and it was assumed that the meaning of the rule was, "endeavoring to sow dissensions by inveighing against our doctrines or discipline in the sense of unchristian railing and violence." This controversy was carried on for years. And in

1830, Dr. Emory, in reply to Mr. Shinn, says: With regard to the rule against endeavoring to sow dissensions in our societies by inveighing against our doctrines or discipline, Mr. Shinn says: If it were so amended as to say in express terms, that it meant endeavoring to sow dissensions by inveighing, in the sense of unchristian railing and violence, he, for one, would have no objection to it, or to its execution. Remarks, pp. 11-12. Now says Emory; "The General Conference have expressly stated that this is its meaning, and nothing else; and that they neither have sanctioned, nor will sanction, any other construction of it. THIS EXPLICIT DECLARATION OF OUR HIGHEST CHURCH TRIBUNAL, IS EQUIVALENT TO AN AMENDMENT IN EXPRESS TERMS; AND CERTAINLY IS AS BINDING ON EVERY ADMINISTRATOR OF DISCIPLINE, AND MAY AS EASILY AND AS FORCIBLY BE PLEADED. The General Conference did not make such an alteration in the form of an amendment, because this would have seemed to be an admission that the rule, as it stood, had the meaning objected to it, which the General Conference deny." Methodist Quarterly, 1830, p 63. We presume we shall be corroborated when we say, that no INDIVIDUAL authority has ever been more profoundly respected in the M. E. Church than that of John Emory. And the testimony he bore to the fact, that an EXPLICIT DECLARATION OF OUR HIGHEST CHURCH TRIBUNAL IS EQUIVALENT TO AN AMENDMENT IN EXPRESS TERMS, we have never heard questioned by any one since it was made. And the cases are exact parallels. The MEANING of certain rules in the discipline in both cases was given by the General Conference; and if thirty odd years since, the explicit declaration of our highest Church tribunal was equivalent to an amendment in express terms," the same must be true in 1860. It seems to us that the General Conference and its able defender were most sadly at fault, or the explicit construction the General Conference has given to the General Rule on slavery in 1860, IS EQUIVALENT TO AN AMENDMENT IN EXPRESS TERMS. And indeed, had the General Conference made the alteration proposed, "it would have seemed to be an admission that the rule, as it stood, did not forbid SLAVEHOLDING, which the General Conference now deny.

In agreement with the principles here stated, and my own reasoning at the time, I received in answer to my personal inquiries, the following. Dr. Havens, editor of Zion's Herald (since Bishop Havens) made this reply: "Rev. Cyrus Prindle, editor of the Wesleyan, published at Syracuse, asks the following question which he proposes to us:

"Do you mean that the General Rule on slavery is now a law, forbidding SLAVEHOLDING in the M. E. Church, and that every one now holding slaves can be brought to trial and expelled from the Church as for any other crime forbidden in the word of God?"

"We answer to the last part of the question YES. To the first part of the question we answer: The General Rules—not Rule—as explained by the General Conference, do forbid the buying, selling or holding human beings to be used as chattels. Any minister, or society, that tolerate slaveholding, does not, in the opinion of the General Conference, obey the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church."

Again, Zion's Herald said: "The preamble which was adopted, claims that a change in the General Rule is NECESSARY ONLY because FALSE INTERPRETATIONS have been made upon it, and that it really in its old form, in spirit, opposes SLAVEHOLDING."

The editor of the Western Christian Advocate in answer to our question, said: "Of the several views set forth, the last one, namely, that while the Rule in express terms condemns the traffic for certain purposes, it also—by fair implication—condemns the holding for the same purposes, is a view adopted by the committee and finally by the General Conference.

By adopting this report, as the General Conference did—this part of it almost unanimously—the General Conference sanctioned the interpretation of the General Rule here given. Those who were unwilling to change the WORDING of the Rule, sanctioned the foregoing interpretation of it by offering to publish it in the pastoral address, or to adopt it as expressive of the judgment of the General Conference on the subject to which it relates. It turns out, then, as we think providentially, that the General Conference, with almost perfect unanimity, have settled the meaning of the General Rule."

Said the editor of the Northern Christian Advocate in answer to my question: "The result now reached is that we have a clear and direct statement of the anti-slavery attitude of the Church; that we have the entire weight of the moral influence of the Church thrown against slavery, and that we have all the forms of law which are necessary to any extent of the prohibitive anti-slavery administration, which it is either possible or desirable to enforce. Then it follows that every man now in the Church who is holding human beings as chattels, is an offender not merely against the

action of the late General Conference, but against the General Rule, under which he was admitted into the Church and has always lived since his admission. And further, that any enactment of the General Conference that would expel all who are, in the sense of the chapter slaveholders, from the Church, would be EXPARTE only in APPEARANCE, not in fact. It would only send the offender back to a well-known and now well defined law of the Church, by which he can and ought to be expelled. We do say, then, in answer to your question, that we do mean that the General Rule, as defined above, is now a law FORBIDDING SLAVEHOLDING in the M. E. Church. And that every one now holding slaves in the sense of the chapter, can be brought to trial and expelled the Church, as for any other crime forbidden in the word of God."

Here are the replies to our question we proposed to these official publications in the Church, soon after the session of the General Conference in 1860. And we proposed this question, not to enlighten our own mind, but to satisfy the religious body for whose benefit we were editing and publishing the American Wesleyan at that time.

During the pendency of this question, I had an interview with the late Bishop Thomson, who was editor of the C. A. and Journal; and while in his office, the conversation turned chiefly upon what the General Conference had done at Buffalo in relation to the subject of slavery. I stated to him, that as the matter then stood, the M. E. Church had all the law they COULD HAVE to exclude all slaveholders from the Church by the ENFORCEMENT of the General Rule, as that had been explained by the General Conference That I could see no reason why this rule was not put in force, only the great regard that was cherished for the "bordermen," and the fear that was entertained that they might go off with the South, if they were not BORNE WITH. To these points I made, the Dr. did not utter a word or sentiment of dissent. And I presumed then that his views were in harmony with those of the other editors already quoted, and I think so still.

The facts here stated, are not only of great importance in the history of the M. E. Church, but they fill a blank that has seldom been touched by writers upon this subject. And to sum up what has been proved in this article, showing that the M. E. Church has never been "CONSTITUTIONALLY OR DISCIPLINARILY" a slaveholding Church, the following facts may be stated:

1. The General Rule, which has always forbidden the "buying and selling of men, women and children, with the intention to enslave them," according to the decision of the General Conference of 1860, was mainly against HOLDING SLAVES. And the only reason why any alteration was made, was because a wrong construction had been put upon the rule as it stood before any alteration was made. That the true meaning of the rule, UNALTERED and ALTERED, was the same.

2. That the administration of the Church for years was pro-slavery, disfranchising many ministers and members for adhering to the anti-slavery sentiments of Methodism. But all this was done, not only without any legal right, but in direct opposition to express law; consequently, all such administration, and the infliction of PAINS and PENALTIES, were without any force or moral sanction, but were the result only of NUMERICAL ASSUMPTION, and rendered the administrators liable to PROSECUTION for maladministration.

3. That the only change that has taken place in relation to the subject of slavery, is not a change in the LAW OF THE CHURCH upon this subject, but in its ADMINISTRATION only. The law of the Church, PROHIBITING SLAVEHOLDING, has always been the same And though the POLICY and PRACTICE of the Church has changed, THE LAW HAS NOT CHANGED. And, therefore, we may confidently maintain, that the Methodist Episcopal Church has never been otherwise than "constitutionally" an anti-slavery Church.

CONCLUSION.

To the doctrine here maintained there can be no objections urged, but that slaveholding and trading in slaves had been practiced for many years, and this practice had so far matured and ripened the habit, as in a QUASI sense, to establish the right to buy, sell and hold slaves. But long years can never legitimize the right of property in that which is not purchasable by any of the laws of trade and commercial transactions. And we may quote the conclusive words of the late John Quincy Adams, who said: "The law of nature is antecedent and paramount to all human governments. Every individual of the human race comes into the world with rights, which, if the whole aggregate of human power were concentrated in one arm it could not take away."

When the noble but untitled Granville Sharp brought the case

of James Somerset, a claimed slave, carried from Virginia to England in 1769, before the court of Kings Bench in February, 1772, for his freedom, he was informed that the laws were against him; that the great lawyers, such as Talbot, York, Eyre, Blackstone and even Lord Chief Justice Mansfield himself—before whom the case was to be tried—were all against the case in this struggle for freedom against slavery, which was enough to dishearten any common man, he did not hesitate a moment, but pushed forward, and by the force of facts and unanswerable arguments, finally wrung from Lord Mansfield—Monday, June 22, 1772, a decision in the following words: "We cannot say the cause set forth in this return is allowed, or approved of by the laws of this kingdom, and, therefore, the man Somerset must be discharged."

This decision was made more than a hundred years ago, and no attempt has been made to modify or change it since. Slavery existed as really in England at the time of this great trial, as in this country. And even Lord Mansfield had decided before this in favor of the claims of slaveholders. But the arguments and facts employed in the Somerset case were so conclusive and overwhelming that his lordship was forced to reverse his own decisions in other cases and settle this question in favor of freedom. Said one of the counsel for Somerset: "He is here; he owes submission to the laws of England, and he has a CORRESPONDING RIGHT to the protection of those laws, he claims that protection, and when the judgment of this court is given, Stewart, as well as the rest of the slaveholders, will know THAT THIS AIR IS TOO FREE FOR EVEN A SLAVE TO BREATHE IN."

This phenomenal transaction was a kind of fac simile of the history of the Methodist Episcopal Church upon this subject of slavery. Decisions have been made by Bishops and other bodies in favor of SLAVEHOLDING, and in some instances in favor of slavery as a whole, but the time has come at last, when a revocation of these decisions has been reached, and FREEDOM, not SLAVERY, has been declared as the birthright of every human being.

There is a single point in this argument that merits a reaffirmation, namely, that so fully has our General Conference jurisdiction over all questions relating to the MEANING of any rule or law, that this body can give an authoritative construction to every particular item in our discipline. And though the restrictive rules forbid changes only by the "concurrent recommendation of three-fourths

of the several Annual Conferences, and two-thirds of the General Conference," yet the General Conference can, in case a dispute as to the MEANING of any or all these restrictions arise, determine the true meaning of these items, the same as any other rule of the discipline. This statement is EMPHASIZED, as some might think that the restrictive rules were out of the jurisdiction or power of the General Conference. They are out of the power of the General Conference as to CHANGES only in the manner here indicated, but not out of the power of this body as to MEANING.